Mythopoeic Society MYTHLORE A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 8
Number 2

Article 8

6-15-1981

The Water Babies: An Appreciation

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Mythcon 51: A VIRTUAL “HALFLING” MYTHCON

July 31 - August 1, 2021 (Saturday and Sunday)
http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-51.htm

Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico; July 29 - August 1, 2022
http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-52.htm

Abstract

Brief description and criticism of *The Water Babies*.

Additional Keywords

Kingsley, Charles. The Water Babies

THE WATER BABIES

AN APPRECIATION

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A recent re-reading of Charles Kingsley's The Water-Babies convinced me that the book was as good as my memories--which is not always the case. I was only able to obtain an abridged edition (Charles Kingsley, The Water-Babies, illustrated by Mabel Lucie Attwell; Pan Books, London, 1977; replica of a 1915 edition; The Water-Babies first appeared in 1863), which was a pity. I would have liked to re-read Kingsley's many whimsical digressions with the help of more knowledge, and I would certainly like to see once again the description of those wonderful "backstairs." But the main thread of the story is still there, and there is much of interest in it for students of mythopoeic fiction (not to mention two beautiful lyrics, "Clear and cool" and "When all the world is young, lad").

Yes, there is "Victorian" morality and sentiment; as in MacDonald. Those who nevertheless like MacDonald, or those who follow Lewis' argument in The Abolition of Man concerning "Men without chests" will not be put off by that. The morality is basically sound for any time; the ethic of a man who was, in his time, a fighter for social justice. Only once was I a bit disconcerted. Tom, in the river, encounters some handsome salmon swimming upstream. That night he sees poachers catch the salmon, and gamekeepers, in their turn, roughly set upon the poachers. The description of Tom's revulsion at the world of human strife was to be expected; but where I looked for a lament for the fate of the fish, I found instead a brief aside to Kingsley's young reader on the ungentlemanliness of poaching. And, even in those days, need the water-babies have worn "the neatest little white bathing dresses?" (The Water-Babies, p. 91)

The story begins when Tom, the chimney-sweep's boy, travels in the company of his cruel master Grimes, and an Irishwoman, both of whom are to reappear later, to the house of a North of England squire, a true John Bull, and his daughter Ellie, a rather shadowy heroine. Here "Tom, for the first time in his life, found out that he was dirty." (WB, p. 24) He runs away, as much from that consciousness as from pursuit, perhaps overwhelmed like Dante in the Dark Wood with the reality of sin, and haunted with the thought, "I must be clean." (WB, p. 39)

The passage describing Tom's escape and climb over Harthover Fell and down Lewthwaite Crag is as evocative a piece of landscape as any I know in English literature, though I cannot quite analyze, word by word, how the effect is gained. But I do know that with the help of an illustration (more likely to have been Ethel Everett's for John C. Winston publishers than Mabel Lucie Attwell's) Tom's view from the top of the crag remained in my imagination for thirty years and is what I think of when J. R. R. Tolkien speaks of "the river and the hill."

Tom then falls into a stream where he becomes a "water-baby" and enters a new stage in his growing up. Here we find Kingsley, like Lewis, Williams and MacDonald, giving us images of a kind of Purgatory in settings which might be this Earth, but distanced by fantasy. There is abundant religious and psychological symbolism in this return to the cleansing and mothering waters. Like Eustace or Caspian, Tom goes into the water and loses his old life, to find himself "quite alive, and cleaner and merrier than he ever had been." (WB, p. 45) There is even something of the famous "return to the womb," for Tom now lives in water and is "3.87902 inches long." (Ibid.)

Now, the idea that the wonders of nature would appear "like a fairy-land" if one were only small enough, has many times led to intolerably cute consequences. But Kingsley brings it off, partly because he must have had an amateur naturalist's love and knowledge of the water creatures, and partly because he adds a vigorous anthropomorphization touched with dry humor.

Ellie now reappears at the seaside, in the company of Professor Ptthmllnsprts, who is a symbol of how not to approach nature. (When I was a child, I accepted this name as just one more of the odd things in the world, and indeed it would never have occurred to me that the name of a person in a story could be a joke. I thought it must be foreign and pronounced something like "Puthmullenspurts." If you are confused, try adding the vowels u e a i i i, in that order.) It is in talking with the Professor that Ellie utters a sentence I never forgot, worthy of consideration by anyone who, with Williams, regards himself as a romantic theologian: "It is so beautiful that it must be true." (WB, p. 81) Lewis, perhaps, played safer when he remarked of his speculations about Heaven, "If they are not true, something better will be." (Letters to Malcolm, final page) But I like both.

After Ellie also dies (Victorian novelists were quite free with death, even in children's books) the plot moves into new realms and the figures of Fairy Bedonebyasyoudid and Fairy Doasyouwouldbedoneby play a leading part. They are strongly reminiscent of MacDonald's shadowy, august goddess-figures such as North Wind, the Princess Irene's grandmother, and others, who are in turn reminiscent, oddly enough, of the thoroughly masculine God of the Bible.

There is also Mother Carey, who appears in a scene much like Diamond's visit to the back of the North Wind, a majestic and mysterious figure who presides over Peacepool, a name which in itself is magical. I shall quote this whole sentence, which for me carries abundant freight of Joy. The fairy tells Tom: "You must go to Shiny Wall, and through the white gate that never was opened; and then you will come to Peacepool, and Mother Carey's Haven, where the good whales go when they die." (WB, p. 127) And so he does.

In the end, even Grimes' sins are repented and purged, and the Great Goddess, so manifold in her aspects, puts in an appearance; though we are cheated of Tom's proper apotheosis. Still, in some way, we have made yet another mythopoeic journey, "safe up the backstairs," (WB, p. 136) or, putting it another way, from hell through purgatory to paradise; and have learned once again that Love and Law, in the end, are one.